

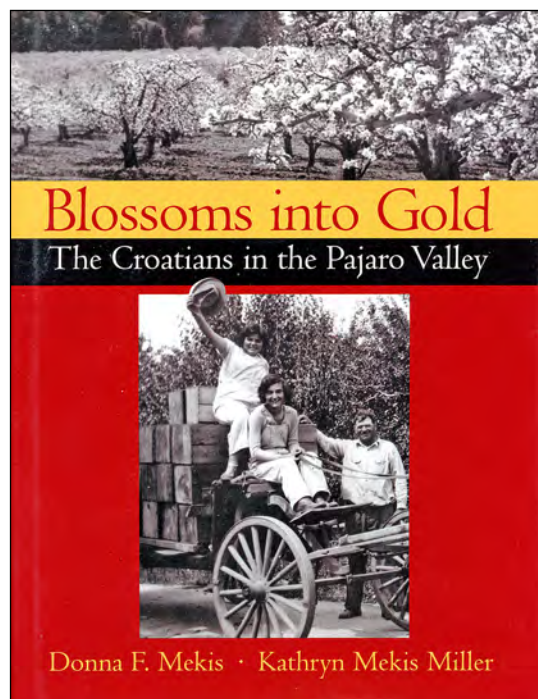
BOOK REVIEW

Blossoms into Gold by Donna F. Mekis and Kathryn Mekis Miller. Published by Capitola Book Co., Capitola, California, 2009. English; third edition; 309 pages, hard cover.

Reviewed by Thomas Ninkovich in Feb. 2026.

The highest concentration of Croatian diaspora in the world could be found in Watsonville, California, during the first two decades of the 20th century. Around 80% of them were from the Dubrovnik area.

The first Croatians arrived there around 1885, after working in other parts of California and the U.S., saving money and learning English. But in Watsonville they did not start out with low-paying jobs. They started out as fruit brokers, risky but well-paying jobs if successful. Between 1885 and World War I, these remarkable emigrants became prominent businessmen in the community. Croatian farmers and farm laborers came too, but the first wave was the brokers.



Blossoms into Gold is the first book to document this unusual history — a commendable and useful endeavor. But the book has many errors and missing information in it. The writing style is fine, most of the stories are well told, but a lot of important information is not there, and a lot of facts are wrong because the book was not fact-checked before publication. The book is simply not finished.

All history book manuscripts have mistakes and missing information in them, especially by first-time authors. Fact-checking and evaluation of manuscripts by professionals are processes that are often used before a book goes to print, and also before each subsequent edition if a book is printed. These processes increase the integrity of a book and its value to the public. For whatever reason, these methods were not applied to this book.

The book is scheduled to be translated into Croatian and published by Srednja Europa in Zagreb later in 2026. An independent evaluation was sent to this publisher at their request. Hopefully they will see the value of a corrected and updated book.

The missing information is necessary to fully explain the beginnings of the Croatian emigration to the Watsonville area. Without it the book is misleading. For example, in a chapter entitled “Early Leaders of the Colony,” 13 Croatian surnames of early Watsonville businessmen are mentioned but 7 important surnames are missing. In addition, the

surnames of Pista and Butier are mentioned only briefly, and Sambrailo is not mentioned at all. Sambrailo, Pista and Butier were three of the most prominent businessmen in Watsonville in the early years. Sambrailo and Pista still are.

There is no excuse for these people to be missing from this book. The Watsonville newspapers of the time wrote hundreds of articles about them. All of those articles can be found in *The Slav Community of Watsonville, California, as reported in old newspapers (1881-1920)*. This book is free on Archive.org in PDF format. The newspapers can also be found online from the Watsonville Public Library website.

The authors certainly have the ability to update the book. The necessary information is easily found. A few more weeks of research and rewriting by the authors and the results would be a book that everyone could be proud of for many years to come.

As it stands, if the mistakes are not corrected and if the missing information is not included in the upcoming Croatian version of this book, then it will continue to be an unfinished work, this time in a different language.

Supplement

(The article below is supplemental material to the above book review.)

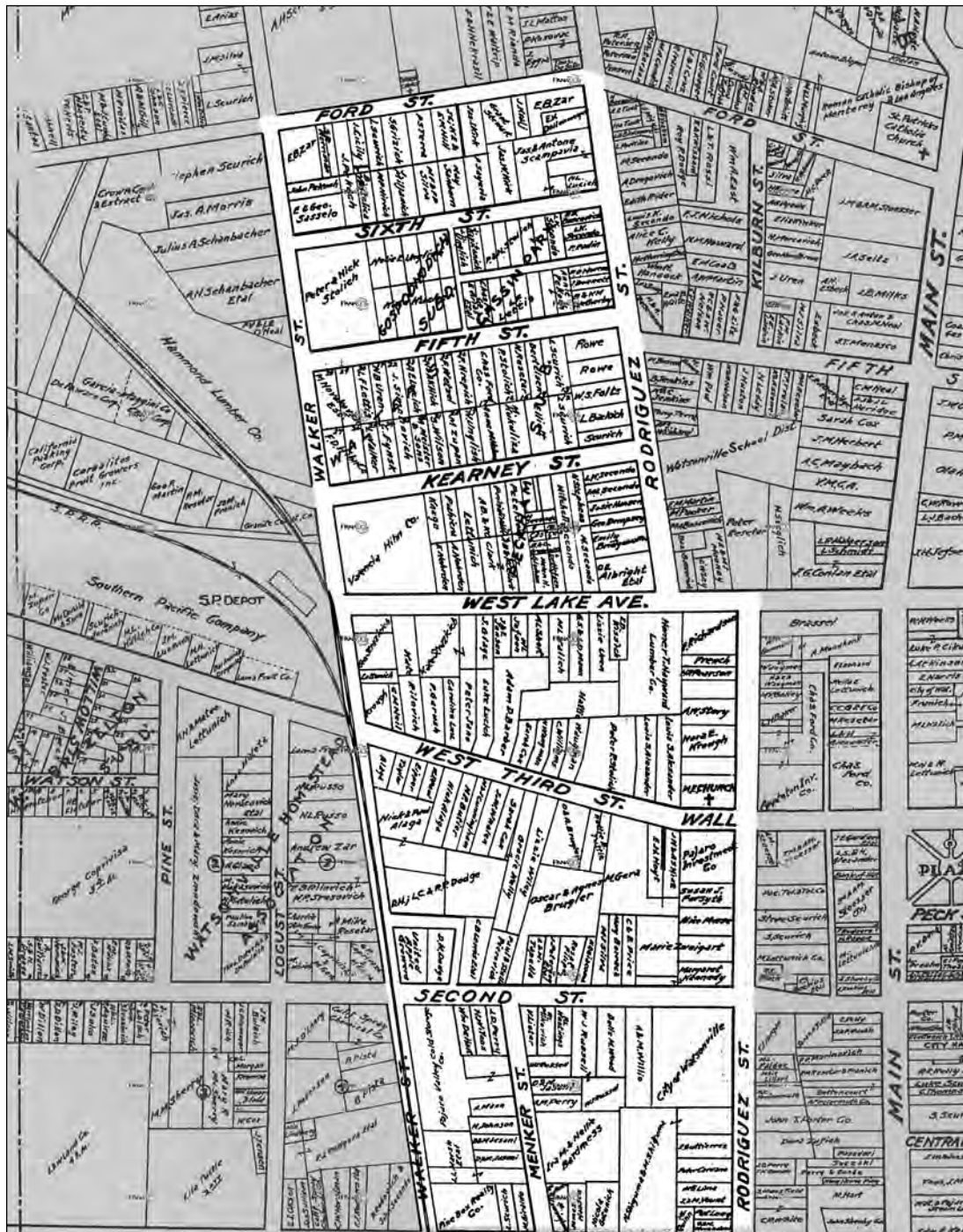
Three major mistakes in *Blossoms into Gold*

There are three major errors in this book that are historically incorrect and misleading. They would not have been there if the book had been fact-checked from the beginning. Here are those major errors:

- **Percentage of Slavs in Watsonville.** In the Introduction on page xix, is this quote: “By the 1920s, these men and their descendants made up more than twenty percent of Watsonville...” The “men” referred to were “boys and men” from the Dubrovnik area. The source given was the 1920 U.S. Federal census. But a careful check of that census shows the percentage of Slavs in Watsonville in 1920 to be 12.8%. This incorrect information has already propagated itself in the Sister City agreement between Cavtat and Watsonville.
- **Croatian Colony in Watsonville.** The term “Croatian Colony” is introduced on pages 154-155 of *Blossoms into Gold* to mean a geographical area of Watsonville. All other references to a “Croatian colony” in this book are to an ethnic group of Croatian people.

Hundreds of times the Watsonville newspapers used the term “colony” to refer to ethnic groups of people in their town (Slavonian colony, Austrian colony, Italian colony, etc.). The term was never used to refer to a geographic area. Also the newspapers never used the term “Croatian colony.” They always used “Slavonian colony” or “Austrian colony.” And those terms always meant “all Slavs,” not just Croatians.

If there are any references or sources of a geographical area of Watsonville being referred to as the Croatian Colony, then they should be mentioned. Otherwise it seems as if the term was created for this book. If this is so, then the authors should explain their reasons.



This map is on p. 154 of *Blossoms into Gold*. The white section shows what the authors claim to be a geographical area in Watsonville called the “Croatian Colony”.

On page 154 is a full-page map showing a white section that the authors claim to be the “Croatian Colony”. The original map is located in the Pajaro Valley Historical Assn. archive and shows all of Watsonville in 1929. The map shown in the book is a section of the original map. But the white section is not part of the original map. It may have been created by the authors or by the book designer. Without sources or an explanation from the authors, this looks like misinformation.

- **Information missing from the book.** The authors of *Blossoms into Gold*, when told that their book has missing information, responded that it's impossible to include all information. Of course this is true. But missing 7 of 20 important leaders in a chapter entitled "Early Leaders of the Colony," is not good enough. These were important people who devoted much effort and money to the development of the Watsonville business community. They deserve to be remembered. See the review above for more information on this issue.